

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A computerized, standardized environment for Employers, Agencies, Consultants and Independent Contractors providing a method for identifying, planning, scheduling and managing personnel in an environment in which there are varying job requirements.
2. In particular, a typical system according to the present invention includes a scheduling, billing, and record keeping environment that may include one or more servers that provide the scheduling, billing, and record keeping functionality. These or other servers may support access by agency, consulting and employing entities who choose to outsource sign language interpreting, spoken language interpreting, court reporting, real time captioning and other support personnel services. Access to the environment may be via any suitable communication channel, which in a typical embodiment will be a computer network such as the Internet. The typical embodiment automatically processes information associated with a plurality of different unaffiliated organizations;
3. Consultants and contractors provide information regarding their services and certification, degrees and experience through a subscription service allowing them access to a computerized scheduling, billing, and record keeping system. Referral placement agencies utilizing the environment post information concerning their respective services, fees, policies and the consultants or independent contractors available through such entities. Outsourcing companies search a database containing Agency's information to determine which entity meets a particular search criterion. Selected agencies receive job assignment information in a job request template. Agency representatives prepare a bid that is sent to the outsourcing companies for review. An outsourcing company will make their selection and award the job assignment to a particular agency or agencies for satisfying their particular job requirements. In some embodiments, agency entities may serve as intermediaries between consulting entities and employing entities. Consulting entities will typically act as independent contractors working for such agency entities. Employing entities may request jobs directly through the environment according to the present invention to registered agency entities in which case the agency entity will enter the job through the environment. In some embodiments, the environment will seek to connect the requestor with consulting entities matching the criteria specified for the particular job.

4. Consulting entities may register with the environment to receive outsource scheduling, billing, and record keeping support. The consulting entity provides information about itself including location, size, business identification number, etc.
5. Agency entities that use multiple consultants may also provide administrative fee/rate mark-ups to be applied when a consultant working for an entity accepts a job through the agency entity. The mark-up may be applied to the consultant's hourly rate or to the overall job rate; further, the mark-up may be defined as a fixed increase or a percentage increase and may vary depending upon characteristics of a particular job or qualifications of particular consultant performing a job. For each consultant in the agency entity, billing rate, tax identification number and certification/experience information is entered. The certification/experience information may vary based upon the field of consulting. In one embodiment, the invention recognizes in sign language interpretation, several national and state entities provide recognized certifications, which may impact the billing rates for interpreters. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. located in Silver Springs, Maryland provides Comprehensive Skills Certificate (CSC), Certificate of Interpreting (CI), Certificate of Transliteration (CT), Combined CI/CT (CI/CT) and Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI). Other national or state entities may have other certification/experience levels. Another example of certification/experience may be in the plumbing field where experience levels are defined in terms of apprentice, journeyman and master.
6. In some embodiments, scheduling restrictions may also be entered per consultant. Depending upon the nature of the consulting entity and the field of consulting, additional information may be required.
7. For agency entities, location and business identification information should be entered.
8. Rates may be entered for a particular employing entity. The rates in one embodiment may be fixed base rates that the employing entity will pay based upon certification/experience level of the hired consultant. Alternatively, the rates may be maximum base rates that the agency entity is willing to pay consultants with the required certification/experience level. The base rates may be further categorized by job type. For instance in sign language interpretation, differing base rates may be provided based upon the field of content being interpreted such as general interpretation, legal, technical, medical or mental health. In addition, hourly differentials may be applied based upon the circumstance of particular jobs such as emergency consulting, after hours consulting or highly technical consulting. In addition rates may be established for consultant travel time to and

from a particular consulting job; these rates may be the same as for actual services or different. The agency entity may also indicate the types of expenses for which the consultant may be reimbursed such as travel (potentially including mileage, tolls, train/bus/air/cab fare, parking, etc.), lodging and meals.

9. Agency entities may also enter requests for specific jobs; such a request would provide specific criteria such as consultant's history, education, certifications and/or licenses. The environment will contact potential consultants meeting the employing entities criteria for the specific job. Once a match is found, a consultant can accept or reject a particular match. If rejected, additional matches may be requested.
10. In one embodiment, all potential matched consultants are contacted, and the first to accept the particular job receives the contract.
11. Agency entities may in turn act as independent contractors to employing entities. The environment will typically perform the functionality for agency entities described above with respect to employing entities.
12. Employing entities may request jobs directly through the environment according to the present invention to registered agency entities.
13. After completion of a particular job, a consultant may enter data related to the services performed and any required travel or expenses. The expenses that are entered are not limited to those reimbursable by the employing entity.
14. Copies of appropriate invoices for the job are automatically generated for both the consulting entity and the agency entity.
15. In some embodiments, consolidating billing for various entities participating in the environment may be prepared and presented to employing entities that used the services of the agencies coordinating the consulting entities. In some such embodiments, electronic payment of the consolidated billing may be accepted and distribution of such payments to the appropriate consulting entities may be accomplished. The environment may generate bills to employing entities based upon the billing data entered. The bills may be prepared and forwarded to employing entities. Where the agency entity participates in the environment, the bill may be

consolidated with billing from other participating consulting entities prior to forwarding to employing entities; such consolidated bills may be forwarded either via traditional channels such as mail or via electronic mechanism such as email or an interactive website (including, but not limited to various wireless mechanisms). In some embodiments, agency entities may also receive consolidated billing information with respect to work performed by particular consultants or for particular employing entities.

16. On a periodic basis or upon demand, aggregated data may be provided to registered consulting entities and agency entities,

17. For agency and employing entities, aggregated invoices for consulting services may be prepared.

18. In certain embodiments, employing entities may pay the aggregated, or in some embodiments individual job, invoices electronically via an appropriate mechanism such as electronic fund transfer, electronic bill pay services or credit card.

19. On a tax period basis, aggregated data may be prepared by the environment for both consulting and agency entities.

20. In some embodiments, various tax or accounting related statements (e.g. yearly 1099 statements) are prepared and distributed to consulting entities as appropriate. In such embodiments, interfaces may be included to support input of data relevant to such statements that may be in addition to or instead of already entered billing data.

21. The present invention presents an environment used for sign language interpretation consulting. Further details with respect to this embodiment are provided below. Those skilled in the art will understand that the principles outlined below will apply to other consultancy fields typically billed via hourly and daily billing rates or per job/project rates such as computer programming, accounting, plumbing, HVAC contractors, mediation, legal, temporary employees/agencies (e.g. clerical, accounting, management), general contractors, attorneys, spoken/foreign language interpretation, home health, lighting technicians, court reporters, real time Captioners and other support personnel.

22. The data store provides for the storage and, potentially, the management of the data required by the environment. Information concerning consulting entities, agency entities and employing entities registered with the environment will be stored in the data store. Further, information will also be stored concerning the contracts and jobs the consulting entities may perform for the employing entities. The architecture of the data store may vary significantly in different embodiments.

23. In one embodiment, relational database(s) are used to store and manipulate the data; in one such embodiment, one or more ORACLE 8I (Oracle Corp., Redwood Shores, CA) database management systems may be used in connection with a variety of storage devices/file servers.

24. In other embodiments, the data store may use database systems with other architectures such as object-oriented, spatial, object-relational or hierarchical or may use other storage implementations such as hash tables or flat files

- a. Consulting entities, agency entities and employing entities registered with the environment will be stored in the data store.